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ABSTRACT

Coaching rhetorical criticism events is demanding because it places demands on a forensic coach's knowledge of rhetorical theory and method and is time consuming. However, it may become a simpler event to coach if there is an understanding of the process of developing a speech for rhetorical criticism and specific strategies that can be used in coaching the event. There are six steps in developing a speech: (1) deciding on a subject, (2) doing research, (3) analyzing through dialogue, (4) utilizing method, (5) synthesizing methods, and (6) writing the speech. Among the ten suggested coaching strategies are talking and listening to students, making students defend their answers to a coach's questions, and keeping an annotated card file of books and articles encountered in readings. (DF)

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Coaching Strategies in Contest Rhetorical Criticism

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Rhetorical Criticism/Communication Analysis has been the subject of controversy from its inception and acceptance as a national tournament event. The event places unique demands on students, coaches, and judges. But those demands should not deter coaches from encouraging their students--event the "novice" competitor--to take advantage of the training that participation in this event offers. This essay offers to both coaches and students some specific suggestions that may make the event of Rhetorical Criticism and enjoyable and exciting pursuit.

Coaching Rhetorical Criticism is a rigorous exercise for the forensic educator. The process places demands on a coach's knowledge about rhetorical theory and method. And coaching Rhetorical Criticism (RC) places demands on the coach's time, maybe more so than any other forensic event. I have developed some ways of dealing with both of these demands that may also prove useful to other RC coaches. I will present my suggestions by 1) articulating my understanding of the event and what I do/do not expect from a student who wishes to compete in RC; 2) explaining the process I take my students through in developing the criticism; and 3) offer some practical methods that RC coaches can use to encourage skills application.

First, I deal with the two demands mentioned above up front. I expect that this event places demands on my time at two different levels. Keeping up with the literature on theory and method can be accomplished by skimming journals, textbooks, and the materials obtained in my graduate classes (those old notes always hold surprises!). I also give my students what time they ask of me. They often want the time just to talk out a sticky idea or to assure

themselves that they do understand what they are analyzing--if my attention bolsters their confidence, then it is time well spent.

Second, my overwhelming concern is for my students' integrity. I want their speeches to be original works full of well-grounded analysis and interesting insight. Thus, I approach the event as a discovery process, one that encourages students to articulate and defend their ideas. Edwin Black speaks of different perspectives toward the critical act in a 1980 WJSC article cited in the appendix to this essay, as do Scott and Brock in the preface to Method of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective. I ask students to read both pieces before they begin any analysis.

Finally, I view a good rhetorical criticism as a good argument--much in the way that Brockriede posits (see appendix for citation) in his insightful essay. The critical process is in many ways similar to the process of making good argument: developing a proposition to prove and supporting that claim via analysis. I encourage my students to ask themselves "what distinguishes this discourse," and to approach their criticism as the answer to that question. I ask my students to view critical method as a terminology, a way to explain their ideas about the artifact under analysis, not some hard and fast system that they must follow to the letter. I also encourage my students to synthesize and use the ideas and explanations of more than one theorist or critic if it will help them explain what they uncover in their analysis. I have attempted to group essays and texts in the appendix in terms of perspective manifest in their work: what a student wishes to explain cannot always be done so within the

parameters of one method's terms.

I have developed the aforementioned perspective toward coaching RC based on my past experience as a competitor, judge, coach, and student of rhetorical theory and method. One could quibble with assumptions that underly my perspective, but that would fog the issue of clarifying perspective in the first place. The best service that any coach can do him or herself is to carefully think through their understanding of the goals of this event. If you think that students should learn all they can about theory and methods through this event, that goal will influence how you coach this event and what you expect of your students. Always keep your perspective in mind as you coach--it is often the first perspective that the student will have on the event as well. The following discussion represents how I have operationalized my understanding of the event and what students should accomplish.

The students at UWEC sometimes exhibit a curious sense of humor. Last year--in jest, they assured me--they parallelled my method of coaching RC to "The Birth of a Nation," highlighting the metaphorical similarities between that movie, my methods, and the human procreation process. "Birthing" a Crit, they said, was a nine-month process which did not really end once the speech was written. Their speeches kept growing, they often demanded care and attention; the process often caused pain and discomfort. But they found the process rewarding, challenging, at the least worth a witty parody. Turning the tables, I asked them to seriously consider how I coached RC-making. They responded with the following six steps that are representative of what

I strive for when coaching.

I. Deciding on a subject for RC. Primary in this initial step is the students' personal interests. I talk with them to discern what they consider to be persuasion and what forms of communication represent that definition. If they begin with a subject in mind, I ask them to explain their interest in the subject; why does the communication event intrigue them, where do they see the persuasive impact, what signals the importance of the event to them. I do not allow my students to use restrictive terms at this point, especially "rhetoric," "methods," or the "M word (methodology)." We discuss the subject as being communicative, persuasive, and meaningful to people who participate in it and study its facets.

To be sure, this initial approach is little more than a modification of terminology. But it encourages students to use their words to explain their initial reactions in an uncomplicated, clear fashion. I ask them to be clear about what makes this subject a communicative event--if they have difficulty or their answer is too convoluted, I will usually suggest that they keep looking for subject matter. If students have to spend five minutes explaining the communicative aspect of a subject in the first place, they will not have sufficient time and motive to discuss the hows and whys of its communicative import.

I will also suggest subjects to students, but only in a limited manner. If an event strikes me a s fruitful for criticism, I will post a notice that says, "Someone might want to check out..." It is more often the case that even novitiates of RC approach me with

subjects first. Of late I find myself encouraging the pursuit of more traditional oratorical forms. It helps me to foster in the novice a basic understanding of communication and rhetoric, and helps the student who is not yet equipped to offer complex views of non-traditional forms. If I can anticipate that a students will encounter audience barriers about the suasory import of an event, I will discourage the pursuit in order to first build analytical skills.

II. Research. When students have decided on a subject, I send them out to research the subject. I ask them to uncover as much as they can about the event and what surrounds it (the rhetor, the audience, the manifest effects immediately and long-term, and other analyses/reviews about the event). This exercise serves two purposes. First, it makes the student a sort of "expert spectator," capable of discussing the situation surrounding the event and the constituents of the event. Second, it helps the students develop a context for the event by giving them something to which they can link their observations. At this point I let the students wallow a bit; that is, enjoy the research process. They invariably come up with much more that they could utilize in their speech, but that is ok. This compels them to make decisions, synthesize on their own. It also allows them to operate from a base that will be hard to exhaust throughout the forensics season--they will always have material to use in the re-writing process should it be needed.

III. Analysis through Dialogue. This is the point at which I spend the most intensive and extensive time with my students. In essence, we spend our time discussing their ideas and the stuff from

which they come. There is as yet no mention of method, nor will there be for a while. Instead I ask my students a series of questions. (They call it the "cross-examination period"). I ask my students to develop statements that answer:

> Why is this event interesting?
> What is unusual about it?
> What is the communication saying?
> Is something being said that is not readily apparent?
> How is the event communicating those things?
> Why did people listen (or are they listening)?
> If you had to highlight <u>one</u> major factor/element involved in this process, what would it be?
> You have only ten minutes to make your case--can you still discuss this major factor meaningfully?

I encourage students to write about their responses to these questions--anything and everything that helps others understand how they came to their conclusions. I ask them to integrate the concept of <u>communication</u> into their writing by discussing what meanings they think have been assigned to the discourse by those exposed to it. The discussion and writing work hand in hand; students accomplish the bulk of their analysis at this time.

The students complete this phase by answering one final question: What sentence or two would represent what you wanted to prove/illustrate about your subject? Their answer to this question will serve as their critical thesis in their speech. By now they have figured this out (at least they have guessed my cross-examination motives) and are ready to provide a clear specific purpose statement. I respond by providing students with readings that parallel the direction they are already pursuing conceptually.

I have found that CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE IS APPARENT IN HOW THE STUDENT TALKS ABOUT THE DISCOURSE. General readings can give the

student a context for their ideas, assure them that there are other people--communication scholars--out there who think critically, too. The scholars use a different language to explain their insights, a language that can help the student in analysis only if they have an initial set of ideas from which to work. Now method can become a tool for the student, a way to uncover the distinctive nature of the discourse, instead of a set of terms that just names things.

IV. Utilizing method. This step is simple and yet involved for the students. With my help and direction, they begin to look for an explanation in communication literature that "helps them say what they want to say" about the subject. I will suggest articles that may be useful, that seem to be talking about the same elements that the students are highlighting in their writing and discussion. I provide them with the Matlon/SCA index to look for specific applications of methods, and I make myself available for discussion of those readings. I keep a fairly extensive file of materials to aid students in tracking down elusive articles, and we spend alot of our time discussing suitability of various methods--do they allow the students to discuss what they feel is important? I encourage the students to read the literature with the "why do we listen" question in mind.

V. Synthesis of method. One of my survey respondents succinctly surmised the goal of this step in the question "do the ideas in the literature expand on your ideas?" That is, does the literature help the students to categorize, pursue other avenues of analysis, or suggest a more general concept/framework into which their analysis may fall? If the answer is no, they go back to step IV. If yes, they

should proceed with two cautions. One, keep their own insights at the forefront of their criticism--a specific down-the-line fit may signal that they are relying too much on the method's terms as a guide. The students need to be able to generalize their insights, at least to other communicative events that may be similar. Heavy reliance on labels may compel them to omit some truly creative and useful ideas should be the organizational guide to their speeches. The method they utilize should not dictate the structure of their speech, it should help them in the endeavor to substantiate their thesis. That is, offer us a reasonable and carefully considered interpretation of the communicative event.

VI. Write the speech. I preface this phase with one dire warning to my students: do not see this as the end of the battle, but the beginning. As my students put it, "labor is over; now we've got to raise the kid." I always feel confident that my students are ready and capable of writing a competitive speech at this point if they have worked through the other five steps. They seem to have the same feeling, and usually produce 15-20 minute drafts. Our first draft review involves two evaluations. First, whether the students are substantiating the thesis they posit in their speech, and second, if their discussion of method is suitable and reasonable. The time offense usually resides in the latter pursuit--which I think is remarkably encouraging! The questions "do you really need to say that?," or "could you integrate that idea into your analysis?" usually aid in the cutting process. I also interject my evaluations when students defend inclusion of material because it is "cute," or

"funny." I have little qualms about cutting a student's speech for time (thus, my students' "caesarian" metaphor) but I do not and will not write a speech for them. I try to avoid even stylistic editing.

I find that the best test of the students' ideas is a tournament, so I encourage them to write it, make it structurally sound, and then get it out to a tournament. The tournament experience provides them with useful feedback, and their preparation process more than adequately equips them to re-write their speeches effectively. My students receive relatively few comments on the appropriateness of critical methods; if any, they are oriented toward expanding the breadth of the approach to include even further literature substantiation.

I have found that this approach to coaching RC is highly successful for two important reasons. First, the students inherently develop an ability to think critically, to interpret and evaluate meaning on their own terms. Second, it prepares them to subsequently comprehend and utilize critical method, even to the extent of cross-applying ideas to similar communicative phenomena. Both are important reasons because they allow students to use the skills they have gained in this process in other situations, and because students gain a substantial amount of self-confidence. In essence, they have tackled an event that few others are willing to approach. They get "hooked" on the event, so to speak, working on their speech and its various re-writes with all the care that a mother would bestow on her children. It is their speech, full of their analysis. My students' positive--

and humorous--responses to this approach confirms my evaluation of its effectiveness.

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What follows are some specific suggestions that I hope will facilitate your coaching of this event.

1. Talk and listen to your students. If you spend enough time listening to their ideas about the event they are studying, it will be much easier for you to discern their RC needs and aspirations. I schedule periods early on in the critical process where we just "muck around" in the communicative event, discussing its attributes and analyzing what it means to audiences.

2. Make students defend their answers to your questions. Students always feel free to make judgments, but they do not often think through the basis for those evaluations. Ask them probing questions like "where do you see that?" "How did you come to that conclusion?" "Give me an example of that at work." Focus them on the subject matter, away from their own feelings and beliefs. This is, I think, crucial for the students. They need to develop a notion of "taking the role of the other," of removing their personal biases from the analytical process.

3. Keep an annotated card file of books and articles you encounter in your readings. I keep a card file/bibliography on both general theory and specific methods. I note the relevant conceptual matter in the literature, where it may fit in reference to other theory or method, and the potential utility for students.

4. I also attempt to keep written record of those criticisms that I hear as a judge at competition. Both good and bad examples have served me well, especially in explaining ideas to students.

5. I try to modify my "RC language style" in order to speak about the event as a persuasive effort. I parallel the consumatory goals of the event to other events that provide interpretations and claims that should be substantiated (persuasive, extemp, impromptu).

6. If you can afford the time, schedule team RC meetings. Gather the "critters" together for discussion and analysis. We discuss progress on each others' speeches, responses on ballots to speeches, and other speeches students have heard at tournaments. This is useful for me, as I do not hear alot of RC at tournaments, so I am not always fully aware of what is vogue. This also provides useful brainstorming time in which students can gain fresh perspectives on their own ideas.

7. Use the skills of other faculty members at your college or university. I send my students to faculty members who teach various subjects (e.g., public address, persuasion, television production, communication theory) to get their insights on the students' work. Their expertise usually proves to be invaluable; they make quite useful remarks on the reasonableness of the students' pursuits.

8. Try to <u>listen</u> to drafts and revisions of the students' speeches. I find it much easier to evaluate the flow of analysis

when I can hear how the student vocally emphasizes ideas. I use a stopwatch for overall time, pausing when necessary to have the student check (✓) parts of the text to be discussed after the read through.

9. Encourage your students to keep all materials and drafts/re-writes of their speeches. This base serves as a visual record of their progress and saves time (and frustration) should the need to refer back to previous work arise.

10. Encourage novice students to listen to Rounds of RC/CA! Preferably, they should do so before entering the event (and, before they draft their first criticism). This exposure often allows them to bring their perceptions of the event's complexity down to human level and grasp the format requirements of the event.

APPENDIX

General Theory and Criticism

BOOKS

Black. Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method (1978: University of Wisconsin Press).

A seminal work that marks the break from Neo-Aristotelian Criticism. Black discusses the strengths and weaknesses of various methods.

Brock and Scott, eds. Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective, 1st and 2nd Eds. (1972: Harper and Row; 1980: Wayne State University Press).

What a book! An important collection of writings on traditional and contemporary theory and method. Some hard-to-find readings/re-prints. I am especially fond of the anthology's "Introduction." The editors offer a useful perspective on the "critical impulse." A comprehensive and useful bibliography are in the text appendix.

Campbell and Jamieson, eds. Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action (1980: Speech Communication Association).

The best exploration of rhetorical criticism of genre to be had. The introduction by the editors is a fine explication of the generic approach. Contributed essays explore traditional and non-oratorical forms of discourse.

DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach. Theories of Mass Communication, 3rd Ed. (1975: Longman Incorporated).

This book provides an overview of the field of mass communication, discussing theories that underscore much media criticism.

Golden, Berquist, and Coleman. The Rhetoric of Western Thought, 2nd Ed. (1978: Kendall-Hunt).

This anthology is another fine series of readings that work well as a preface to those in Scott and Brock. The emphasis is on theoretical underpinnings of various critical approaches, classical to contemporary.

Johannesen, ed. Contemporary Theories of Rhetoric: Selected Readings (1971: Harper and Row).

A good resource for readings that outline the direction of the "New Rhetoric" contemporary theory construction: Kenneth Burke, I.A. Richards, Richard Weaver, Chaim Perelman, Stephen Toulmin, Marshall McLuhon are all given clear treatment. This text also

includes the theoretical probes of Bitzer (Rhetorical Situation), Wallace (Good Reasons) and Brockriede (Dimensions).

Newcomb, ed. Television: The Critical View, 3rd Ed. (1982: Oxford University Press).

A collection of criticisms of television discourse forms, this anthology illustrates the myriad of approaches that could be utilized when analyzing mediated messages. Fascinating and provocative.

Newcomb. TV: The Most Popular Art (1974: Anchor Books).

Chapter 1, "Responses to Television" discusses the strengths and weaknesses of a variety of critical approaches to mediated messages.

Nichols. Rhetoric and Criticism (1963: Louisiana State University Press).

A series of eight lectures Nichols delivered in 1959. Nichols offers highly regarded interpretations of the theories of Burke and Richards.

WJSC Fall, 1980 "Special Edition on Rhetorical Criticism," Michael Leff, Guest Editor.

A good collection of essays that explore today's directions in criticism.

ARTICLES

Edwin Black. "The Second Persona," QJS, April, 1970, pp. 109-119.

Ernest Bormann. "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," QJS, December, 1982, pp. 396-407.

Wayne Brockriede. "Rhetorical Criticism as Argument," QJS, April, 1974, pp. 165-174.

A "must read" for all students and coaches of RC/CA. Brockriede explains why criticism must go beyond description. The argument metaphor is a valuable teaching tool for any coach.

Walter Fisher. "A Movie View of Communication," QJS, April, 1970, pp. 131-139.

Kathleen Jamiesen. "Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, Summer, 1973, pp. 162-170.

Osborn and Ehninger. "The Metaphor in Public Address," CM, August, 1962, pp. 223-234.

Ware and Linkugel. "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the General Criticism of Apologia," QJS, October, 1973, pp. 273-283.